

CREATE FAIRNESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SNAP BENEFITS

After years of uneven application of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the states, Congress must ensure that SNAP resources provide benefits in times of need while encouraging program participants to actively pursue long-term independence from government support.

BACKGROUND

In December 2019, the Trump administration finalized a rule modifying “conditions under which USDA would waive, when requested by States, the able-bodied adult without dependents (ABAWD)” work requirements, which is set to take effect on April 1, 2020.^{1,2} ABAWD recipients are SNAP participants who meet the criteria of a non-disabled adult aged 18 through 49 who live in childless households.³

SNAP is the largest food assistance program for low-income individuals and families. Federal law generally limits an ABAWD to three months of SNAP benefits in a 36-month period, unless the individual meets a range of eligible work requirements.⁴ States may petition the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for authority to temporarily waive that time limit in certain areas with an acute unemployment level.⁵ The new Trump administration rule essentially tightens the criteria for waiving existing SNAP work requirements.⁶

SNAP work requirements include reasonable criteria and compliance standards that are designed to encourage ABAWDs to move towards increased self-sufficiency. According to the USDA, the work requirements for ABAWDs may be met by any one of the following activities:

- Work at least 80 hours a month. Work can be for pay, for goods or services (or something other than money), unpaid, or as a volunteer;
- Participate in a work program at least 80 hours a month. A work program could be SNAP Employment and Training or another federal, state, or local work program;
- Participate in a combination of work and work program hours for a total of at least 80 hours a month; or
- Participate in workfare for the number of hours assigned to each month.⁷

Quick Take

Reasonable work requirements encourage childless, able-bodied SNAP recipients to move toward increased self-sufficiency without onerous standards.

Taxpayers should not be compelled to provide indefinite welfare benefits to adults without dependents who are able to work and actively choose not to work, pursue education, or even volunteer in their respective communities.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “states requested waivers that covered 37.8% of the [American] population.”⁸ The need to waive the time limits on SNAP benefits for ABAWDs consistently fails to reflect the reality of readily available unemployment information. For example, the entire State of California waived work requirements for ABAWDs in the first quarter of 2018,⁹ while unemployment in the state was less than 4.3 percent over that same period.¹⁰

Despite the fact that the unemployment rate has radically decreased since the 2009 Recession¹¹ (reaching as low as 3.6 percent in October 2019),¹² the average number of ABAWDs participating in SNAP each month nearly tripled from 1.7 million¹³ to 4.6 million participants between 2007 and 2015.¹⁴ Federal SNAP spending more than doubled from 2007 to 2017, with over 42 million recipients receiving \$68 billion in SNAP benefits in 2017. Nationally, 44 percent, or about half, of ABAWD recipients receiving SNAP benefits live in waived areas, according to the USDA.¹⁵ The Trump administration’s SNAP rule is projected to save over \$5 billion from 2020-2024.¹⁶

CONSTITUTIONAL AUTHORITY AND REPUBLICAN PRINCIPLES

Congress has the authority to spend resources to address the general welfare of the nation. Generally, Republicans believe that welfare programs most effectively empower individuals and confer dignity to beneficiaries when they support intact families and incentivize work.

POLICY SOLUTIONS

Congress should codify the Trump administration’s SNAP rule to clarify that waivers to ABAWD work requirements must be limited to significantly acute areas of unemployment.¹⁷ Taxpayers should not be compelled to provide indefinite welfare benefits to adults without dependents who are able to work and actively choose not to work, pursue education, or even volunteer in their respective communities.

Please contact Cameron Smith or Kelsey Wall with the Republican Policy Committee at (202) 225-4921 with any questions.

¹ 7 CFR 273 (2019).

² ABAWD recipients represent about 3.8 million SNAP participants, or about 8.8 percent of all participants. FNS, Characteristics of ABAWDs, 2016, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/nondisabled-adults.pdf>.

³ FNS, Characteristics of ABAWDs, 2016, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/nondisabled-adults.pdf>

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ In the fourth quarter of Fiscal Year 2019, six states had a statewide waiver, 30 states had a waiver for part of the state, and 17 states had no ABAWD waivers. U.S. Dept. of Agriculture. *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Status of State Able Bodied Adult without Dependents (ABAWD) Time Limit Waivers – Fiscal Year 2019 – 4th Quarter*, Last updates 8/12/2019. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/media/file/FY19-Quarter4-ABAWD-Waiver-Status.pdf>

⁶ The new SNAP rule requires states seeking waivers to demonstrate a “floor” unemployment rate of 6 percent, a decrease from the former 10 percent rate. For reference, the national unemployment rate was 3.6 percent in October 2019, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2019/unemployment-rate-was-3-point-6-percent-in-october-2019.htm?view_full.

⁷ U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *SNAP Work Requirements*, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/work-requirements> (last visited March 4, 2020).

⁸ Ctr. on Budget & Pol’y Priorities, *States Have Requested Waivers from Snap’s Time Limit in High Unemployment Areas for the Past Two Decades*, Dec. 5, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/states-have-requested-waivers-from-snaps-time-limit-in-high-unemployment>.

⁹ U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, *Status of State Able-Bodied Adult without Dependents (ABAWD) Time Limit Waivers Fiscal Year 2018 – 1st Quarter (2018)*, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/snap/FY-2018-Quarter-1-ABAWD-Waiver-Status.pdf>.

¹⁰ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Databases, Tables & Calculators by Subject*,

https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LASST060000000000003?amp%253bdata_tool=XGtable&output_view=data&include_graphs=true

¹¹The Great Recession unemployment rate reached about 10 percent in 2009, while the January 2019 unemployment rate was about 4 percent. *See*, BLS Spotlight on Statistics: The Recession of 2007-2009 (2012), https://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2012/recession/pdf/recession_bls_spotlight.pdf.

¹² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, TED: The Economics Daily, Unemployment rate was 3.6 percent in October 2019, November 6, 2019, https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2019/unemployment-rate-was-3-point-6-percent-in-october-2019.htm?view_full.

¹³ Memorandum from Cong. Research Serv. to Gene Falk Specialists in Social Policy & Randy Alison Aussenberg, Specialist in Nutrition Assistance Policy, *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Participants Who Are Non-Disabled, Age 18-49, and Without Dependents (ABAWDs)*, (Nov. 3, 2017) [hereinafter CRS Memo].

¹⁴ *Foundation for Gov't Accountability, Work Requirements: Solving the Dependency Crisis*, <https://thefga.org/research/work-requirements-solving-the-dependency-crisis/> (last visited May 4, 2018) [hereinafter Dependency Crisis]; *Dep't of Health & Human Serv., Prior HHS Guidelines and Federal Register References*, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/prior-hhs-poverty-guidelines-and-federal-register-references> (last visited May 5, 2018).

¹⁵ 7 CFR 273 (2019).

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ President Trump signed the Agriculture and Nutrition Act (Pub. L. No. 115-334), commonly known as the Farm Bill, into law on December 20, 2018. Earlier drafts of the Farm Bill originally included language enforcing the SNAP proposed rule that were not included in the final text of the law.